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S. Korean Opposition Fails in Unity Attempt

Kim Dae Jung Refuses to Quit Party Post

By Peter Maass
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SEOUL, March 9—Opposition leader Kim Dae Jung today defiantly rejected calls for his resignation from politics, a move that dashed hopes for a merger of South Korea's main opposition parties before legislative elections in April and virtually ensured that the ruling party will once again face a splintered antigovernment movement.

Kim's announcement appeared to mark the failure of several weeks of complex maneuvering aimed at unifying the country's center-left opposition parties, still reeling from their loss in the Dec. 16 presidential election. The antigovernment vote was divided mainly between Kim Dae Jung and his rival, Kim Young Sam, allowing the ruling party's Roh Tae Woo to win the long-awaited poll with 36 percent of the votes.

Just as the two Kims invited defeat by splitting the opposition vote in the presidential election, rival opposition candidates in congressional districts are expected to split the antigovernment vote, allowing ruling-party nominees to win with minority victories.

Moreover, most political analysts believe that middle-class disaffection with the squabbling opposition parties will deepen, driving more votes to the ruling Democratic Justice Party.

"We're heading for disaster," said

an official at Kim Dae Jung's Party for Peace and Democracy. The official's comment underscored the dissent that has broken out even within the PPD. Over the past two months, it has lost several key members who walked out over Kim Dae Jung's refusal to step aside. And after his press conference today, scuffling and shouting broke out between Kim Dae Jung loyalists and dissident members who want the party president to take a political back seat.

Attention has been focusing on Kim Dae Jung because Kim Young Sam abruptly acceded to public pressure last month by resigning as president of his Reunification Democratic Party. Although Kim Young Sam still functions as the power broker in that party and is said to hope for a political comeback, his public profile has been reduced.

A few weeks after his resignation, Kim Young Sam held a surprise meeting with Kim Dae Jung, their first encounter since they failed last fall to agree on a single opposition candidate. The two Kims made a vague call for merging their parties. Kim Young Sam's party later said the merger could only occur if Kim Dae Jung would also step back from active leadership in the opposition.

However, Kim Dae Jung said today he had no intention of stepping down. "It is morally wrong and politically nonsensical to demand my retirement," he said. Instead, he proposed that the two opposition

parties agree to cooperate by not running candidates in the same assembly districts. He also suggested that a unified opposition party, with him and Kim Young Sam as co-leaders, could be formed after the assembly election.

Kim Young Sam immediately blasted Kim Dae Jung's stance, saying in a statement that he was trying to "gloss over mounting calls for his resignation."

Political analysts said Kim Dae Jung's decision not to budge partly reflected the innate stubbornness that gave him the willpower to lead the opposition through the oppressive rules of presidents Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo Hwan. But the analysts said Kim Dae Jung's blockage of an opposition merger is mainly a clever, although cynical, move aimed at turning the tables on Kim Young Sam's party, which is the largest opposition organization.

Under a new election law pushed through the assembly this week by the ruling Democratic Justice Party, Kim Dae Jung's party is likely to become the largest opposition group. The complex law favors parties with concentrated areas of support. Kim Dae Jung's support is concentrated in the Cholla provinces and in urban areas elsewhere, while Kim Young Sam's support is spread more thinly over the entire country.

Amid the opposition feuding, the ruling party, which holds a majority of assembly seats, was able to pass its own election law. The ruling party had tried to reach a compromise with the opposition parties, but because the opposition was unable to unite behind one proposal, the ruling party called a quick vote early yesterday morning on its own proposed law. Opposition legislators hurled books and small objects at the speaker's podium, but the law was passed.

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